

House Bill 382 Testimony

Senate Fish and Game Committee

Submitted by
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Parent/Sportsman
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Chairman Barkus and committee members thank you for the opportunity to provide comments today.

My name is Mac Minard and I am here representing myself as a parent, past Hunter Education Instructor, and avid sportsmen of over 40 years. I stand in support of HB 382.

1) Need

The number of hunters in America is declining at an alarming rate. Some research indicates that for every 100 aging hunters who leave the sport only 67 replace them on a national level.

A national study published by NSSF and cited by SCI concludes that the reasons are

- Structured time -
- More emphasis with indoor computer related recreation

Richard Louv in his recent book "Last Child in the Woods" sums up his findings in a single sentence:

"Our children are the first generation to be raised without meaningful contact with the natural world".

Here in Montana

- Youth may hunt waterfowl, upland birds, turkey and big game at age 12 or older after passing HD course which requires a minimum of 12 hours of instruction although the average is about 15 -16 hours including a field day.
- Youth younger than 12 may under close adult supervision hunt gophers, prairie dogs and other varmints. I call this the let them shoot gophers model.

Under the current model Montana is

- Enjoys the highest per capita rate of participation in the nation

- Relatively low compared to other states in terms of hunter recruitment, perhaps the bottom third in the nation.
- One study estimates recruitment at .56 (56 new hunters for every 100 leaving)
- Mark Duda with Responsive Management concluded that youth introduced to hunting before the age of 12 were far more likely to remain hunters than those who started at an older age.
- Numbers of HD students are stable at 6,500 per year but down significantly from 7,500 per year a decade ago.
- Recruitment of young hunters is not sufficient to sustain the current rate of participation.

Maintaining the current "let them shoot gophers" model will with certainty result in a decline in the number of hunters in Montana.

2) Seeking a Solution

Is there a crisis with respect to the future of Hunting in Montana?

- No not in the immediate future
- Yes in the long term

Is there reason to act now? I believe there emphatically is.

We also have a tremendous opportunity at the present time

- We have a rich culture
- We have a great deal of opportunity for diverse and abundant game species
- We have pristine habitat
- We have the largest per capita population of hunters in the Nation

In short - we are not New Jersey

We have a great chance to combine the large bank of experienced and active hunters in Montana with that age of hunter most likely to carry the tradition into the future, and who for the most part are ignored under the current system.

This effort, HB 382, is intended to combine research results with opportunities to come up with a solution to the recruitment problems by utilizing proven methods.

In 2008/09 the Families Afield coalition (local representatives from, SCI, USSA, NSSF, NWTF, NRA and Montana HE Instructors) began to reexamine the trends in Hunter recruitment and a youth hunting opportunity

- We met with Department staff and reexamined the previous effort
- We hosted five meetings across the state to meet with interested persons

We concluded the minimum age (**Not the Hunter Education requirement**) or "let them shoot gophers model" was an impediment to increased hunter recruitment in Montana.

We worked with Representative Hamilton to draft HB 382.

3) Mistakes Were Made Along the way

- No minimum age – the diaper bill
- Other concerns – limit of one apprentice per mentor, tightening up the sight and sound requirements, set a limit on the number of years an apprentice could participate were to be taken care of by amendment.

What came out of the house and is before you now as HB 382 in the amended form is a good bill except that by setting the age requirement at 14 and limiting the participation to a single year it has been gutted and will have no measurable benefits.

4) What does HB 382 actually do?

- This bill creates a partnership with Hunter Education by allowing youth to be involved early and will ultimately have more citizens complete the training by getting them hooked in a safe exciting manner.
- The Apprentice Hunter bill requires that before an apprentice can become a fully licensed hunter, or before they hunt un-accompanied, they must first complete hunter education.
- Allow the parents to decide when a youth is emotionally and physically ready to hunt. Not all qualified youth will participate.
- Establishes qualifications for the mentor so the knowledge gained through Hunter Education will be in the field at all times with the apprentice as a result of the requirement that the mentor complete Hunter Education. Because of this, claims that this program will instill bad habits are simply untrue.

5) Next Steps

HB 382 needs to be amended in two ways:

- Set the age of participation at 10
- Set the time frame to participated to 2 years

6) What can be expected?

- Past experience in nearly 30 other states suggests:
- You will see nearly instant increase in the number of young hunters.
- More families will enjoy the outdoors than are doing so today
- Safety standards will be maintained as 250,000 young hunters have yet to report an accident – making the supervised apprentice hunter the safest hunter in the woods.

I appreciate your time and consideration on this important matter and urge you to amend and pass HB 382.

Thankyou

We in Montana share a rich hunting heritage. As the leading state in the nation in hunter participation we pride ourselves in our skill, knowledge and passion for the outdoors. We are conservationists first and hunters second. We want nothing more than to pass that heritage on to the next generation so those values we all share survive into the future.

Who better than a father, a mother, a brother, a sister, or trusted friend, to introduce our youth to hunting. It is a well researched fact that kids from hunting families, who hunt with their families, are far more likely to become and remain hunters.

When I was 9 ½ my father put me on our old John Deere tractor. While he sat on the fender and guided me around the back field I learned how to run the controls. He had made the decision that at that age I was emotionally and physically ready to be of help to my family by running that piece of equipment. Families in Montana make those decisions every day. Perhaps you have a similar story. I believe it is no different with hunting. It is the parent who is in the best position to know when a child is physically and emotionally ready to hunt.

In today's American family, which I believe is the raw core of our nation, we find that kids' time is more structured than ever before. As a soccer coach for the past 12 years I have had the opportunity to spend months each year with young

athletes and their families. What I have learned is that kids are growing up faster and are more involved in structured activities than I ever was. By age 12 and 13 most have entered middle school and they are involved with school sports, band, dance, church, clubs ... the list is endless. The desire to participate in those activities grows even stronger when they enter high school. The net effect is that getting them hooked on hunting is now in competition with many other activities (including be a couch potato playing video games).

At the 9, 10, 11 year old level demands on their time is not as great. Some, not all, are emotionally and physically ready to join the family on a hunt while closely attended by a mentor. At this age we have the best opportunity to introduce hunting to them in a way that will make it a lasting part of who they are. HB 382 opens the door for that opportunity.

HB 382 also gives the opportunity for a busy adult, who may not yet know the joys of a day in the field in pursuit of game, to try it under the watchful eye of an experience hunter. If it suits them then they would take the prerequisite Hunter Education course so that they too may hunt on their own and maybe mentor another person.

HB 382 is in no way meant to be a substitute for Hunter Education. Montana's 12 hour course and small army of qualified instructors are to be celebrated not diminished. I view the Apprentice Hunter program to be a partnership between parents who are actively engaged in the life of a youth and the Hunter Education program. We generate the interest and get them started and well-trained Instructors have an opportunity to polish, refine and finish.

Montana is number 1 in participation but we are in the basement in terms of new hunter recruitment. Apprentice hunters are active in 27 different states and account for some 250,000 new hunters. There has not been a single hunting accident involving a mentored youth, making that component the safest in the field.

I urge you to demonstrate your faith in the American Family structure and the future of hunting in Montana by supporting HB 382.